

An Enthralling Romance of Young Love and High Adventure

(Continued from Preceding Page)

dazzling smile, which showed all her white teeth, and which seemed somehow to become reflected in her dark blue eyes.

"But I meant you!" she exclaimed. "I thought that you knew that! There is no one else. You are my friend, I know very well, for you came and spoke kindly to me when I was terrified—terrified to death."

The shadow of gravity rested only for a moment upon her face. She laughed gaily at my consternation.

"Then where am I to take you?" I asked.

"Stupid," she murmured; "I am going with you, of course. Why—why—you don't mind, do you?" she asked, with a sudden catch in her throat.

I felt like a brute, and I hastened

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scious of her position, gave a hand to each, and looked at them almost piteously.

"You will not mind my coming," she begged, with a tremendous little note of appeal in her tone.

"I do not seem to have any friends, and Mr. Arnold has been so kind to me. If I may stay here for a little while I will try—oh, I am sure, that I will not be in anyone's way!"

The pathos of her breathless little speech was almost irresistible. The child, as she stood there in the centre of the room, looking eagerly from one to the other, conquered easily. I do not know if either of the other two were conscious of the new note of life which she seemed to bring with her into our shabby, smoke-smelling room, but to me it came home, even in those first few moments with wonderful poignancy. An alien note it was, but a wonderfully sweet one. We three men had drifted away from the whole world of our womankind. She seemed to bring us back instantly into touch with some of the few better and rarer memories round which the selfishness of life is always building a thicker crust. For one thing, at that moment I was deeply grateful—that I knew my friends. My task was made a sincere.

"My dear young lady," Mabane exclaimed, with unmistakable earnestness, "you are heartily welcome. We are delighted to see you here!"

"More than welcome," Arthur declared. "We are all one here, you know, Miss de Sorrens, and if you are Arnold's friend, you must be ours."

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"You are very, very kind," she said. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you both."

Arthur rushed for our one easy chair, and insisted upon installing her in it. Mabane lit a stove and left the room swinging a kettle. I drew a little sigh of relief, and

threw my hat into a corner. Apparently she had conquered my friends as easily as she had conquered me.

"Arthur," I said, "please entertain Miss de Sorrens for a few moments, will you. I must go and interview Mrs. Burdett."

"I'll do my best, Arnold," he assured me. "Mrs. Burdett's in the kitchen, I think. She came in just before you."

Mrs. Burdett was our housekeeper and sole domestic. She was a hard-featured but kindly old woman, with a caustic tongue and a soft heart.

"The responsibility for the whole affair," I declared, "remains with Arthur."

lent for several moments. Mabane eyed me curiously. I think that at first he scarcely knew whether to believe me altogether serious.

"The man who was with the girl," Arthur asked at last—"this Major Delahaye, or whatever his name was—is he dead?"

"He was alive two hours ago," I answered.

"Will he recover?"

"I believe that there is just a bare chance—no more," I answered. "He had a weak heart, and the shock was almost enough to kill him."

course my story sounded a bit thin, and the police made me go to the station with them. As luck would have it, however, I knew the inspector, and I managed to convince him that I was telling the truth, or I doubt whether they would have let me go. I suppose," I added, a little doubtfully, "that you fellows must think me a perfect idiot for bringing the child here, but upon my word I don't know what else I could have done. I simply couldn't leave her there, or in the streets. I'm awfully sorry—"

"Don't be an ass," Arthur in-

and closed. My host of a few hours ago stood upon the threshold, smiling suavely upon us. He wore a low black hat, and a coat somewhat thicker than the season of the year seemed to demand. Every article of attire was different, but his face seemed to defy disguise. I should have known Mr. Grooten anywhere.

His unexpected presence seemed to deprive me almost of my wits. I simply gaped at him like the others.

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "You here!"

He stood quite still for a moment, listening. Then he glanced around

the room. He looked at Mabane, and he looked at Arthur. Finally he addressed me.

"I fancy that I am a fairly obvious apparition," he remarked. "Where is the child?"

"She is here," I answered, "in another room with our housekeeper just now. But—"

"I have only a few seconds to spare," Mr. Grooten interrupted ruthlessly. "Listen to me. You have chosen to interfere in this concern, and you must take your part in it now. You have the child, and you must keep her for a time. You must not let her go, on any account. Unfortunately, the man who sold me that pistol was a liar. Delahaye is not dead. It is possible even that he may recover. Will you swear to keep the child from him?"

"I hesitated. It seemed to me that Grooten was taking a great deal for granted."

"You must remember," I said, "that I have absolutely no legal hold upon her. If Delahaye is her guardian it will be quite easy for him to take her away."

"He is not her legal guardian," Grooten said sharply. "He has no just claim upon her at all."

"Neither have I," I reminded him. "You have possession," Grooten exclaimed. "I tell you that neither Delahaye, if he lives, nor any other person, will appeal to the law to force you to give the child up. This is the truth. I see you still hesitate. Listen! This also is truth. The child is in danger from Delahaye—hideous, unmentionable danger."

I never thought of doubting his word. Truth blazed out from his keen grey eyes; his words carried conviction with them.

"I will keep the child," I promised him. "But tell me who you are, and what you have to do with her."

"No matter," he answered swiftly. "I lay this thing upon you, a charge upon your honor. Guard the child. If Delahaye recovers there will be trouble. You must brave it out. You are an Englishman; you are one of a stubborn, honorable race. Do my bidding in this matter, and you shall learn what gratitude can mean."

Once more he listened for a moment intently. Then he continued. "I am followed by the police," he said. "They may be here at any moment. You can tell them of my visit if it is necessary. My escape is provided for."

"But surely you will tell me something else about the child," I exclaimed. "Tell me at least—"

He held out his hand. "You are safer to know nothing," he said quickly. "Be faithful to what you have promised, and you will never regret it."

With almost incredible swiftness he disappeared. We all three looked at one another, speechless.

(To Be Continued)

The Sergeant Turned to Isobel. "Did you know him?" He Asked.

interrupted energetically. "Of course you couldn't do anything but bring her here. You acted like a sensible chap for once."

"Have you questioned her," Mabane asked, "about her friends? If she has none in London, she must have some somewhere?"

"I have questioned her," I answered, "but not very successfully. She appears to know nothing about her relations, or even her parentage. She has been at the convent ever since she can remember, and she has seen no one outside it except this man who took her there and came to fetch her away."

"And what relation is he?" Allan asked.

"None! He called himself simply her guardian."

Arthur walked across the room for his pipe, and commenced to fill it.

"Well," he said, "you are like the man in the Scriptures, who found what he went for to see. You've got your adventure, at any rate. Allowing to my advice, too. Hello!"

We all turned round. The door of the room was suddenly opened

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to make what amends I could. I smiled at her reassuringly.

"Mind! Of course I don't mind," I declared. "Only, you see, there are three of us—all men—and we live together. I was afraid!"

"I shall not mind at all," she interrupted cheerfully. "If they are nice like you, I think that it will be delightful. There were only girls at the convent, you know, and the sisters, and a few masters who came to teach us things, but they were not allowed to speak to us except to give out the lessons, and they were very stupid. I do not think that I shall be any trouble to you at all. I will try not to be."

I looked at her—a little helplessly. After all, though she was tall for her years, she was only a child. Her dress was of an awkward length, her long straight hair arranged in the coiffure of the schoolroom. The most surprising thing of all in connection with her was that she showed no signs of the tragedy which had so recently been played out around her. Her eyes had lost their nameless fear; there was even color in her cheeks.

"Come along, then!" I said. "We will turn into the Strand and take a hansom."

She walked buoyantly along by my side, as tall within an inch or so as myself, and with a certain elegance in her gait a little hard to reconcile with her years. All the while she looked eagerly about her, her eyes shining with curiosity.

"We passed through Paris at night," she said, with a little reminiscent shudder, as though every thought connected with that journey were a torture, "and I have never really been in a great city before. I hope you meant what you said," she added, looking up at me with a quick smile, "and that there are parts of London more beautiful than this."

"Many," I assured her. "You shall see the parks. The rhododendrons will be out soon, and I think that you will find them beautiful, though, of course, the town can never be like the country. Here's a hansom with a good horse. Jump in!"

I think that our arrival at Number 4, Earl's Crescent, created quite as much sensation as I had anticipated. When I opened the door of the large, barely-furnished room, which we called our work-

shop, Arthur sprang from the table on which he had been lounging, and Mabane, who was still working, dropped his brush in sheer amazement. I turned towards the girl.

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Arthur rushed for our one easy chair, and insisted upon installing her in it. Mabane lit a stove and left the room swinging a kettle. I drew a little sigh of relief, and

She heard my story unmoved, betraying neither enthusiasm or disapproval. When I had finished, she simply set her cap straight and rubbed her hands upon her apron.

"I'd like to see the child, as you call her, Mr. Arnold," she said. "You young gentlemen are so easy deceived, and it's an unusual thing that you're proposing, not to say inconvenient."

So I took Mrs. Burdett back with me to the studio. As we opened the door the music of the girl's strange little foreign laugh was ringing through the room. Arthur was mounted upon his hobby, talking of the delights of motoring, and she was listening with sparkling eyes. They stopped at once as we entered.

"This is Mrs. Burdett, Isobel," I said, "who looks after us here, and who is going to take charge of you. She will show you your room. I'm sorry that you will find it so tiny, but you can see that we are a little cramped here!"

Isobel rose at once.

"You should have seen our cells at St. Arguel," she exclaimed, smiling. "Some of us who were tall could scarcely stand upright. May I come with you, Mrs. Burdett?"

The boy whistled softly. He looked at me with wide-open eyes. "Come," he declared. "I like that. Why, I have never seen the girl before in my life, or anyone like her. Where do I come in, I should like to know?"

"It was you," I said, "who started me off to Charing Cross."

"You mean to say that you picked her up there?" Mabane exclaimed. "I will tell you the whole story," I answered. "She comes with the halo of tragedy about her. Listen!"

Then I told them of the things which had happened to me during the last few hours.

CHAPTER VI. I CERTAINLY could not complain of any lack of interest on the part of my auditors. They listened to every word of my story with rapt attention. When I had finished they were both si-